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An interesting phenomenon takes place in the world of nature when the larvae of the Monarch butterfly goes through the period of metamorphosis in the protective cover of the cocoon, and emerges as one of the most beautiful butterflies in North America. This phenomenon seems to be an appropriate metaphor to use in our discussion of the African-American Music Idiom. This idiom was developed and nurtured in the "cocoon" of the Black Church, while undergoing the "metamorphosis" of slavery, second-class citizenship, and segregation and emerge as the beautiful Black musical, "Butterfly," which stands at the very foundation of the only true American music. A casual look at the world of popular music would reveal that African-American music and musicians are being imitated the world over. As Dave Clark, the leader of a British Group in the fifties called, The Dave Clark Five, stated in an interview almost three decades ago, "we are all trying to sing colored."[1]

It is also becoming clearer, that this "*colored*" attitude of singing was developed in the environment of the Black Church. Leroi Jones stated in 1963,

> The early black Christian churches or the pre-church "praise houses" became the social focal points of Negro life. The relative autonomy of the developing Negro Christian religious gathering made it one of the only areas in the slave's life where he was relatively free of the white man's domination. The "praise nights" or "prayer meetings," were also the only times when the Negro felt he could express himself as freely and emotionally as possible.[2]

Rock and roll is another music that effects this kind of historical background. Rock and roll was not really a new type of popular music, for as Fats Domino, a popular Black recording artist stated, "what they call Rock and Roll, I have been singing for fifteen years as Rhythm and Blues."[3]

During the 1960s, there was an increase in demand for materials relevant to Black cultural experiences due to widespread Black protests. These materials suggest that there is such a thing as an "African-American Aesthetic," and that this "esthetic" has its roots deep in the soil of Africa; and contrary to the opinions of many, these Africanisms survived the horrors of American slavery.[4] As Leroi Jones reminded us,

> It is certainly immediately apparent that all forms of political and economic thought which were two of the most profound sophistication's of African culture, were suppressed immediately. The extremely intricate political, social, and economic systems of the West Africans were, of course, done away with completely in their normal manifestations. The much praised "legal systems" known could not function, except very informally, in the cotton fields of America. The technology of the Africans, iron-working, wood carving, weaving, etc., died out quickly in the United States. Almost every aspect of African culture took a new less obvious form or was wiped out altogether.... Only religion (and magic) and the arts were not completely submerged by Euro-American concepts.[5]

Religion and art certainly are important aspects of any culture and it is a well-documented fact that the transplanted African brought with them some form of religion. It is also a well-documented fact that, "during the years 1702–1705 the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts sent clergymen to the colonies to minister to the slaves and to convert them to Christianity."[6] The missionaries believed that converting the slaves to Western Christianity would make them more "docile" and "humble," thereby producing a more obedient slave. The missionaries devised "slave catechisms to insure that the message of Black inferiority and divinely ordained white domination would be instilled in the slaves."[7] One such catechism might read as follows:

> *Question:* What did God make you for?
>
> *Answer:* To make a crop.
>
> *Question:* What is the meaning of "Thou shalt not commit adultery?"
>
> *Answer:* To serve the heavenly Father, and our earthly master, obey our overseer, and not steal anything.[8]

According to Cone, "it does not take a seminary education to know that white missionaries were distorting the gospel in order to defend the enslavement of Blacks but white Europeans did not succeed; and Black history is the record of their failure."[9] And of course nowhere is the record the failure reflected better than in the time-honored songs known as spirituals, the first real body of music developed by the transplanted African, and the body of song that is the foundation for all other types of Black music created in the United States.

The Black Church during the period of slavery was known as the "invisible church." This church was not located in a building as such, but in the areas far away from the plantation big house, where slaves assembled at night and developed those songs based on the Old Testament stories of the struggles of the Hebrew children in captivity and eventual freedom in the lands of Egypt and Babylon. Many of these songs were based on African melodies as well as melodies picked up from the missionaries and plantation owners, but they were tinged with a particular "African-American Attitude (the idiom)," towards the elements of music, namely melody, rhythm, and harmony. Following the Emancipation years, 1863–1865, the famous Fisk Jubilee Singers presented their version of these songs on a tour that took them to England and other foreign countries during the years 1871–72. That was the first time that the newly developed "African-American Music Idiom" was heard outside the United States.

Towards the end of the eighteenth century, some Blacks were allowed to worship in the same buildings with whites, but confined to sit in the balconies. The story of Richard Allen and his friends being removed bodily from their seats at the Old St. George Methodist Church in Philadelphia is well known. Incidents like these were the reasons that many Blacks began to establish their own churches. With the establishment of their own congregations Blacks were free to worship as they pleased and in their own manner. The earliest permanent congregation in the nation was the First African Baptist Church at Savannah, Georgia, founded in 1788 by Andrew Bryan (1737–1812), who was ordained a Baptist minister that year.[10]

...[Black] music is reflective of whatever condition Black people find themselves in...

According to Leroi Jones, "blues began in slavery, and it is from that peculiar institution, as it was known euphemistically, that blues did find its particular form. And if slavery dictated certain aspects of the blues form and content, so did the so-called Emancipation and its subsequent problems dictate the path blues would take."[11] Following the Emancipation, Blacks were allowed to travel outside of the south and of course they took their music with them. The "idiom" now began to take on more "secular" aspects as Black music has always been a social art and the music is reflective of whatever condition Black people find themselves in at that particular moment and time.

Following the end of WWI and WWII, large numbers of Blacks began moving to the large cities in the north. In the early 1930s, Thomas A. Dorsey, who was a musician at the Pilgrim Baptist Church in Detroit, began composing what has come to be known as Gospel Music. Dorsey was an exceptional musician and was comfortable in writing and performing African-American music in many styles. His most famous composition is entitled, "Precious Lord, Take My Hand." Prior to his composing this song, Dorsey was the accompanist for Ma Rainey, one of the famous "blues" singers of this period. Dorsey was able to apply the musical idioms that were developed in his hometown church in Georgia, to the new and different social situations found in the larger urban cities. The result is something that Michael W. Harris calls "the gospel blues."[12] This might be an appropriate term to describe the "idiom" as it is used in this context.

If one listens closely, the African-American attitude towards melody, rhythm, and harmony in the blues is quite similar to these elements in the gospel song. It is clear that both the spirituals and the blues were nurtured within the confines of the Black Church. It was here that the singers applied their unusual vocal qualities and harmonies of existing song and to those created from their own imagination. The "sliding" and "slurring" effects in African-American music were developed in the Black Church. Listen to any recording of Aretha Franklin singing "Respect" and then listen to her rendition of "How I Got Over" from the great 1972 recording, "Amazing Grace." A keen musical ear will observe the unusual vocal gymnastics characteristic of Aretha, in both of these recordings. It must be pointed out that Aretha did not learn to sing at one of the nation's music conservatories. Aretha developed and sharpened her art in her father's church long before she became a recording star. In fact Reverend C. L. Franklin, Aretha's late father said, "if you really want to know the truth, Aretha has never really left the church."[13]

It is a rather interesting fact that the growth and dissemination of the "African-American Music Idiom," has occurred almost simultaneously with the growth and development of the recording industry. Black musicians were among the earliest to record their music. "The earliest recordings of Black musicians that can be documented came in 1901 when Victor Talking Machine Company recorded Bert Williams and George Walker singing popular songs and songs from Black musicals to the period."[14] The earliest recording of a Black female singer took place on February 14, 1920, when Mamie Smith sang, "You Can't Keep a Good Man Down" and "This Thing Called Love."[15] By this time, the idiom was popular throughout the nation, and recording companies began to label recordings by Black artists as "race records" to distinguish them from recordings made by white artists.[16] In many ways, the recording industry has been a blessing and a curse to the idiom. Without the industry, many people would not have heard this beautiful "butterfly." On the other hand, the idiom in most cases, has always been presented to the public by white "imitators" of the idiom, who were always able to reap huge financial profits from their efforts because of the peculiar racial character of the American public in the early years, as well as today.[17] The category of "race records" was given to recordings made by Blacks from 1920 until June 25, 1949, when *Billboard*, a music trade magazine, introduced the term rhythm and blues to define

the Black popular music idiom. Rhythm and blues had its origins in the Black Church also. Many of the rhythm and blues artists of this period were formerly members of Gospel singing groups like the Dixie Hummingbirds and the Soul Stirrers. Sam Cooke and Jackie Wilson were formerly members of these groups.

The idiom has left its impression on what we shall call Euro-American Music to identify, European Classical music that has been the foundation of academic music study since the early 1800s, in America. On December 2, 1923, Roland Hayes (1881–1976), an African-American concert singer from Georgia, became the first Black artist to perform at the famous Boston Symphony Hall. On this program, Hayes performed a group of French, German, and Italian art songs, and closed with a group of Negro Spirituals. This concert was the beginning of a long and illustrious career for him, on the great concert stages of the world. He was really the first great American concert singer.

For many years Hayes' contributions to American music remained unnoticed, but in January and February of 1996, the city of Boston celebrated his accomplishments in the world of music with a series of concerts and related activities. For our purpose here it is important to note that Hayes and his family were members of the Ebenezer Baptist Church in Boston, for many years. Hayes had very positive ideas regarding the importance of Negro folk music. He once said in an interview:

> My people have been very shy about singing their crude little songs before white folks. They thought that they would be laughed at—and they were! And so they came to despise their own heritage if, as I truly believe, there is purpose and plan in my life, it is this: that I shall have my share in rediscovering the qualities we have almost let slip away from us; and that we shall make our special contribution only a humble one perhaps, but our very own human experience.[18]

Were he here today, Mr. Hayes would be amazed to see that this humble contribution has become the foundation for the truly American music, and indeed the "esthetic base" of this magnificent period in the history of music which Henry Pleasants and many, many others have labeled, The Afro-American Epoch.

Today, the Black Church is still the only place that the descendants of Africans who were made slaves in America, can truly be free. A close look at the top American musicians in the popular field will show that a large majority of them received their early music training in the Black Church. Academic institutions are beginning to include the study of the great body of music in their curriculum as an integral component of intellectual understanding of music: thus, the metaphor of the "cocoon." The cocoon is the silky and fibrous case in which the larvae of the butterfly spins about themselves to shelter it during the pupa stage. With time and patience, and great struggle, "metamorphosis" takes place, and the beautiful butterfly floats above the earth. The African-American music idiom, was developed and nurtured in the "cocoon" of the Black Church. In the fullness of time, the idiom overcame the "metamorphosis" of slavery, second-class citizenship, and segregation and exploitation described in this essay, and emerged as the beautiful "Black Butterfly" energizing the "aesthetic" which is at the base of African-American culture, and today, even world culture.

Black Butterfly

Awakening

A genius has been asleep too long
A people with a beauty rich and strong
A heritage that rates second to none

Original

Your qualities don't change them to fit in
Now that you're on top just keep rising
Experience new life be born again

What's going on
Truth not revealed unless you choose to see
Past generations lost in history
To hide our culture and identity
Keep your pride
You can't be another color butterfly
So when you shine let everybody see your light
'Cause you know out of sight means out of mind

Black Butterfly
You can do most anything your heart desires
Freedom comes with understanding who you are
It's time too reclaim your place among the stars
Spread your wings and fly.[19]

Notes

[1]*American Music: From Folk to Jazz and Pop*, prod. and dir. ABC: Mcgraw-Hill, Video.

[2]Leroi Jones, *Blues People: Negro Music in White America*. (New York: Morrow Quill, 1965), 40-41. [Leroi Jones changed his name to Amiri Baraka.]

[3]*Rock and Roll the Early Years*, prod. Archive Film Production, Burbank, CA, 1984, Video.

[4]Kariamu Welsh-Asante (Ed.) *The African Aesthetic* (London: Greenwood Press, 1993).

[5]Jones, *Blues People*, 15-16.

[6]Eileen Southern, *The Music of Black Americans* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1983), 38.

[7]James Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues* (New York: Maryknoll, 1991), 38.

[8]Ibid., 23.

[9]Ibid., 24-25.

[10]Southern, *The Music of Black Americans*, 72.

[11]Jones, *Blues People*, 50-51.

[12]Michael W. Harris, *The Rise of Gospel Blues* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

[13]Aretha Franklin and James Cleveland, "How I Got Over," *Amazing Grace*, Atlantic 2-906-2.

[14]Southern, *The Music of Black Americans*, 304.

[15]Ibid., 365.

[16]See, Brian Rust, *The American Record Label Book* (New Rochelle, New York: Arlington House, 1978); Steve Chapple and Reebee Garafalo, *Rock and Roll is Here to Pay* (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1977).

[17]See, "Black Roots and White Fruits," in *Rock and Roll is Here to Pay*.

[18]Southern, *The Music of Black Americans*, 402.

[19]Sound of Blackness, *Africa to America The Journey of the Drum*, Perspective Records. Manufactured and distributed by A&M Records, 1994, 31454 9006 2.

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